

### Geographers and Maps

Geographers by no means monopolize either the use or the development of the geographic method. That method has long been used in the biological and earth sciences, and it is used with increasing frequency in the social sciences.

On the other hand, geographers have the longest, strongest tradition of map-based scholarship focused on the location of human settlements. Laypersons associate geography with places and maps, and they appreciate help in understanding why they make that connection. Many geographers have followed their map instincts into the discipline. Traditionally geography has embraced the largest single group of students and scholars in the organization and authorship of atlases of maps, and in the use of both map libraries and cartographic laboratories in the universities. Only methodological research, or methodological essays such as this one, may be free of dependence on maps.

To be sure, the field is open. A wide range of scholars will continue, as they have in the past, to drift in and out depending on the degree to which they use the geographic method and focus their use of it on understanding the geography of human use of the earth.

After perhaps a quarter-century of vigorous, often exciting exploration on the fringes and beyond, it seems to me that the study and practice of geography has recently begun to focus somewhat more sharply on human settlement systems and the language and discipline of maps. Specialization increases, of course, as the number of scholars, volume of data, and curiosity about the world keeps growing. But a field's focus can be independent of size and complexity. It is more a matter of common, broad, organizing questions and method.

Obviously, I could have put most of this essay in the interrogative rather than the declarative form. I have chosen to make it declarative because it is essentially a summary of personal convictions about the field, based on working experience and exposure to the ideas and substantive work of countless professional colleagues, to whom I am deeply indebted.

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## "YOU CAN'T GET THERE FROM HERE" WITH TODAY'S APPROACH TO GEOGRAPHY

**Andrew McNally III**

*Rand McNally and Company*

Much has been researched, documented, and written about the "geographic illiteracy" of the people of the U.S. in the past several years. I don't need to belabor that subject for an audience of professional geographers. Nor do I need to dwell on the baleful consequences of the decline of geography teaching. From grade school through university levels, both geographers and the public at large have long suffered the consequences of a nation that knows little about the crucial political, economic, military, scientific, recreational, and other impacts of geography on our daily lives. Indeed, we have reached the ludicrous point where we now have stories of credit card companies turning down applicants from New Mexico because they think New Mexico is a foreign country.

The reasons often given for the decline of geography teaching are varied. They all have some validity. However, they tend to miss the crucial issues that geographers can continue to ignore only at their peril.

The decline of geography as a discipline began, some suspect, with the introduction of

blended social studies at the grade school and junior high levels in the 1950s. Of course, that answer tends to beg the question of why were the social studies blended in the first place, and why was geography so quickly lost from the blend? Besides, Americans were woefully under-educated in geography long before the 1950s. If anything, having just come out of World War II and embarking on an era of unprecedented international involvement, travel, space exploration, satellite technology, etc., the past forty years should have been a period ripe for exploitation with a growing—rather than declining—interest in geography.

"Well, OK, but"—so another rationale goes—"America is an isolated continent and people so free of direct entanglement with other cultures don't feel the need to have the grasp of world geography in the way that students in other countries have. It's the same reason Americans are not as multilingual as people in many other countries."

That argument does not quite wash, either. For one thing, studies have shown that Americans are as ignorant of the geography of their own country or their own state as they are of the rest of the world. Languages are probably taught more widely than ever, yet geography and map skills are something that we can all use in day-to-day living in a way that is impossible for many who study languages. It is odd, therefore, that geography is the discipline that we may reasonably fear will eventually disappear completely from curricula at all levels. Even the once prestigious and renowned department of geography at the University of Chicago seems to be fading from the scene.

"Geography is too tough a subject. American students are lazy." Maybe. But I seem to see students doing things in computer science, mathematics, and other disciplines that are no more important and no less rigorous. Other disciplines may not be as widely studied as we would like. But they aren't disappearing, either.

I suspect, however, that a large part of the blame for the diminution of geographical studies must be placed on the shoulders of professional geographers. Or as the comic strip's Pogo once said, "We have met the enemy and they are us."

As an example, I would like to point with approval at the efforts of the NCGE, and the AAG, and more recently, the Geographic Education National Implementation Project (GENIP). Materials developed and disseminated by these organizations are making a significant contribution towards developing an understanding of fundamental geographical concepts. Rand McNally is proud to help underwrite the most recent efforts of GENIP.

What concerns me is that these materials may still be missing one root of the problem. That is: *How should geography be taught?*

An experience of some years back may serve as an illuminating anecdote.

Isobel Lawrence, respected author of colorful, accurate, historical books for children, was at the public library in Rand McNally's hometown of Skokie, Illinois, for a National Library Week celebration sponsored by Rand McNally in the 1960s. Also at the library was Dr. Carl Mapes, Rand McNally's distinguished Senior Geographer at the time. Dr. Mapes was lecturing a group of fourth graders about geography and the space program, using the motorized, 6 ft. diameter Rand McNally GeoPhysical Globe as an attention-riveting prop.

"That globe is beautiful!" Isobel exclaimed. "It's so exciting. But why is he being so dull (referring to Dr. Mapes's pedantic presentation)? He's boring the socks off those kids."

At that point, Isobel launched into a dozen sound ideas of how she would make the GeoPhysical Globe come alive and relate to the interests of those fourth graders. Isobel, by the way, having written a book on Colonial Williamsburg for children of the same age, was dressed in a costume typical of the Colonial Williamsburg era. In this and other ways, she made history "come alive" for her audience as well as her readers without sacrificing accuracy or diluting her subject.

Looking back, I think Isobel may have put her finger on, if not the problem with geography teaching, at least a central problem.

Beginning at the elementary grade level, students *do* have interests that should make them receptive to appropriate education in geography. They want to get from their house to a friend's house or the shopping mall. They go on vacations. They have relatives in distant cities, states, and countries. They are fascinated by satellites and space shuttles. They worry about nuclear warfare and intercontinental ballistic missiles and gasoline for their cars. They like rock-and-roll groups from England, Macadamia nuts from Hawaii, automobiles from Japan, and computers from everywhere.

In short, there is a critical geographical component to many of their interests. They will

study and understand geography if it is related to those interests in the way that an Isobel Lawrence could do it, and if it can be shown to have some use and meaning in their lives and careers.

Yet, to take just one example, out of the millions of American students of all ages fascinated by satellites and space shuttles, I dare bet that not one out of ten could explain the geographical basis for the orbital pattern of a satellite or why the space shuttle may take off from Florida and land in California.

It is intuitively obvious, moreover, that appropriate kinds of geographical studies have a great deal of interest for a wide, popular audience. A commercial example of which Rand McNally is quite proud is our "Places Rated Series," which has sparked the public imagination and provided launching pads for alert geographers who want to debate their approaches or refine their conclusions. From *Places Rated Almanac*, dealing with quality-of-life factors related to place, to others in the series on retirement, sports, and vacations, they represent applied geography that is colorful, controversial, and widely helpful. Considering the public's demonstrated geographical malaise, it is amazing that the sixty-three-year-old *Rand McNally Road Atlas* continues every year to be the best selling paperback annual published in the U.S.

Geography, as a discipline, needs to capitalize on other such opportunities for "real world" examples of skills and research applications. We need to be a scythe that cuts both ways, on the leading edge of science and in the involvement of the general public, pursuing research and disseminating information. The "Applied Geography" conferences are, for example, a step in the right direction but have not gone nearly far enough to meet the need.

One of the fundamental concepts of modern business is being "market-driven." That means that if you want to be successful in marketing a product or service to people, your best chance is to pay attention to what those people want and need rather than trying to force them to accept what you like or what you think they *should* want.

My sense of outrage and despair over the decline of geography departments in universities is tempered by the realization that if there is no "market" for what geographers offer, there is no justification for geography departments to exist. But the market *is* there. We just have to learn to adapt the product to fit the needs of the marketplace.

We can point our fingers all we like at low budgets, difficult students, boards of education, parents, deans, faculty committees, and a host of other reasons for the decline of geography as a discipline. We may even be right that these are contributing factors. Solving those problems, however, can at least be made easier if we also reform ourselves.

Whether through the NCGE, and the AAG, GENIP, or another body, there now should be a focus on research and testing of teaching *techniques* in imparting geographic and map skills and how to make geography relevant at all levels of education. It is not enough to call for more money, more support for geography in the curriculum, etc. There is going to be little enthusiasm for those kinds of reforms so long as geography teaching is not molded to attract the attention of the general student population.

It seems to me there needs to be a simultaneous, three-pronged attack on this general problem.

1. Academic geographers should lead the way in putting more emphasis on teaching and recruiting undergraduates to graduate-level geography programs.

For the past few decades, most university geography departments have suffered from a "tenure syndrome" that has promoted research and "publication counts" at the expense of teaching skills, and graduate programs at the expense of undergraduate programs. The result is an academic system that is responsive to the momentary needs of the individual or department, but not to the long-term needs of the profession or the population. Furthermore, those potential geography students who do have teaching talents tend to get the discouraging message that their talents are unnecessary and unwanted.

If a university department's continued existence depends upon the demand created through a supply of undergraduate applicants, then it is frustrating to see teaching and recruiting undergraduates with a variety of skills so widely ignored.

2. Geography majors need to be trained in how to teach their subject to the undergraduates who follow them and, thereby, how to communicate their subject and its importance to others as well. All education students should be required to take basic courses in geography, but they also need to be taught how to pass this information along to *their* students in a lively, meaningful, and relevant way.

3. At grade school through high school levels, techniques need to be developed for teaching geography in a relevant and effective manner. Proficiency tests and standards of achievement in basic geographic principles, map skills, and geographic information also need to be developed and integrated into the social studies curriculum.

Not only is it going to help eradicate geographic illiteracy among the general population, it is also going to be far easier to attract geography majors at the college level if the subject can be more effectively presented throughout the elementary to high school grades.

Perhaps computers could help revolutionize the teaching of geography. An imaginative programmer could take the GENIP curriculum standards as content guidelines for creating educational game software that could make learning geography and map skills challenging and fun. It will not work, however, if all we do is transfer the dullest kind of pedantry to a computer disk.

Moreover, computers are coming to play an increasingly dramatic role in mapmaking and other aspects of applied geography. This is helping to open up new careers for geographers in business, government, and academia. Computerized learning tools could serve the dual purpose of familiarizing their students with a basic tool of their profession as they learn their subject.

Failing some such effort to bring geography back into the mainstream of education, geographers and mapmakers alike will have missed the golden opportunity our era offers to show that our "products" are excitingly relevant to people's daily lives, needs, and interests. Conversely, the public's current sensitivity to the problems generated by geographic illiteracy (termed "the assault on dumbness" in a recent *New York Times* article) provides us with a golden opportunity to solve this problem while establishing geography as a prominent component of every citizen's life process.

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## STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR GEOGRAPHY DEPARTMENTS?

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Strategic planning is a technique from the commercial world which could assist geography departments in adapting to today's more demanding administrative environments and thereby further the development of the discipline. This paper sets out the fundamentals of planning as a prelude to a generic departmental plan. Key inclusions are explained and certain problems of application are discussed, should departments adopt such an approach. **Key Words:** strategic planning, strategy, geography department, academic development.

This journal has long been prominent in diagnosing academic geography [32, 52, 53] and advancing remedial measures or new directions [11, 28, 37, 38]. While retrenchments or closure of departments are now facts of life, benefits potentially available from strategic planning may

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